

Sen and Social Exclusion

Abstract

In his article, 'Social Exclusion', Discourse and Chronic Poverty: A South African Case Study', Andries Du Toit argues that the concept of social exclusion has limited utility for the field of development studies where chronic poverty, such as that experienced by agricultural workers in South Africa's Western Cape district of Ceres is often the result of incorporation on particularly disadvantageous terms (adverse incorporation) rather than any process of exclusion. Du Toit (2004:987-8) therefore calls for 'a move beyond the simple counter-positions of 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' and ...the use of concepts that allow a much more sensitive analysis of the links between livelihood dynamics and the broader discursive, social and spatial formations of power'. I argue that thinking about social exclusion has already moved beyond a simple included/excluded dichotomy and that use of Sen's analytical framework assists researchers to tease out the complex, interconnected factors underlying chronic poverty such as that experienced by agricultural workers in Ceres.

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Introduction

The concept of social exclusion is a relatively recent import into the field of development studies and debate continues as to its usefulness. Some development academics believe that the concept of social exclusion is useful because the emphasis on the social and economic processes that create exclusion helps academics and policy-makers better understand the causes and consequences of exclusion and deprivation which in turn opens up new possibilities in terms of policy interventions (see for example, de Haan 1998:11; Gore 1995:8; Sen 2000: 45-47). For example, Rodgers (1995:51) notes that an emphasis on process is particularly important for development academics concerned with links between deprivation and development.

Particular patterns of development may have exclusion built into them, in that economic growth is concentrated in particular regions or groups, the gains are captured by national or international elites [and] the need for cheap and docile labour leads to the suppression of rights.

Critics of the concept, such as Du Toit, argue that the concept has limited utility in situations where chronic poverty is often the result of incorporation on particularly disadvantageous terms (adverse incorporation) rather than any process of exclusion. Du Toit (2004:987-8) therefore calls for 'a move beyond the simple counter-positions of 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' and ...the use of concepts that allow a much more sensitive analysis of the links between livelihood dynamics and the broader discursive, social and spatial formations of power'. I believe that the concept of social exclusion can add value to analyses of poverty in developing countries if researchers make full use of existing analytical resources, in particular the analytical framework put forward by Amartya Sen in his paper, 'Social Exclusion: Concept, Application and Scrutiny'.

Sen's analytical framework

Sen (2000:8) believes the concept of social exclusion is useful because of its emphasis on the role of relational issues in deprivation. However Sen (2000) goes further, arguing that it is important to distinguish between exclusion which is in itself a deprivation (that is, the exclusion has constitutive relevance) and exclusion which is not in itself negative but which can lead to other deprivations which do have constitutive relevance. Sen (2000:13) cites lack of access to the credit market or landlessness as examples of this latter type of exclusion which have what Sen calls

instrumental importance. That is, landlessness or not being able to access the credit market may not be impoverishing in themselves, but may lead to other deprivations (such as income poverty) through causal consequences, such as the inability to take advantage of income generating activities which require collateral or an initial investment and use of credit (Sen 2000:13).

Elaborating the causal chain in this way elucidates the processes which lead to poverty and social exclusion. This type of causal analysis is further enhanced by distinguishing between active and passive exclusion. According to Sen (2000:15), active exclusion is the result of a deliberate policy to exclude certain people from particular opportunities. The Australian Government's decision to deny certain categories of refugees access to a range of benefits and government welfare programs is an obvious example of active exclusion. On the other hand, passive exclusion occurs when 'there is no deliberate attempt to exclude', rather deprivation is the unintended result of social processes or policy decisions, as for example, when economic restructuring results in increases in unemployment in certain sections of society (Sen 2000:15).

However, Sen warns against trying to explain all cases of capability deprivation in terms of exclusion.

Many problems of deprivation arise from unfavourable terms of inclusion and adverse participation...[It is] very important to distinguish between the nature of a problem where some people are being *kept out* (or at least *left out*) and the characteristics of a different problem where some people are being included – may even be forced to be included – in deeply unfavourable terms (Sen 2000:28-29 emphasis in original).

In other words, an individual's failure to obtain adequate basic capabilities can have diverse origins, encompassing unfavourable inclusion as well as exclusion (Sen 2000:29).

The concept of social exclusion has been criticized because it obscures the way in which mainstream processes and institutions create or exacerbate capability deprivation (see for example, Atkinson 2000; Geddes 2000; Green & Hulme 2005; Levitas 1998). I would argue that this problem can be avoided through use of the analytical framework briefly outlined above. This proposition is tested by applying Sen's analytical framework to the case presented in Du Toit's article.

Constitutive or instrumental?

As noted earlier, the concept of social exclusion focuses attention on the processes that cause capability deprivation. Factors such as inequality and relational poverty, exclusion from the labour market, the credit market or health care, as well as gender related exclusions and inequality and food market poverty can all cause capability deprivation (Sen 2000:40-44). (1) This list is not exhaustive, with other academics identifying exclusion from political engagement as an important dimension of social exclusion (see, for example, Burchardt et al. 2002:30). Of the seven factors listed above, five are clearly relevant to the situation in Ceres; that is, inequality and relational poverty, exclusion from the credit market, food market poverty, exclusion from political engagement and gender related inequalities. The labour market is also an important factor, but in this instance, the problem is one of unfavourable inclusion rather than exclusion.

Inequality and relational poverty occurs when an individual is unable to take part in the normal life of the community because as Adam Smith put it, the individual is unable 'to appear in public without shame' (Sen 2000:4). Inequality and relational poverty is clearly a reality for agricultural workers in Ceres who are marginalized by their inability to 'participate fully in a society in which acts and practices of consumption are given increasing cultural and material centrality' (Du Toit 2004:999).

Agricultural workers in Ceres are also excluded from the credit market.

Respondents reported very little direct access to the resources necessary for...independent entrepreneurial activity (Du Toit 2004:996).

In addition, many experience food market poverty because they lack the resources necessary to grow their own food and at times do not have sufficient cash income to purchase food which is available through the market. For example, Du Toit (2004:996) reports that even within the top income quintile, 'almost 40 per cent of respondents reported at least one hungry month, while half of the respondents in the sample reported going hungry for half the year or more'.

Poverty amongst agricultural workers in Ceres is also characterized by exclusion from political engagement, with poor households not participating in local or national decision-making (Du Toit 2004:999).

Rather than acting collectively to address the underlying causes of poverty and vulnerability, poor people in Ceres relied on informal networks – family, friends and employers – to tide them over when times were hard (Du Toit 2004:998-999).

This reliance on informal social supports is one of the reasons poor households in Ceres can be said to experience gender related inequalities. As is often the case, the burden of maintaining the informal social supports necessary for day-to-day survival is borne 'almost exclusively by women' (Du Toit 2004:997). Furthermore, certain gender related inequalities are linked to racial inequalities with the permanent agricultural workforce being predominantly male and coloured, while the seasonal or contract workforce is mostly female and African (Du Toit 2004:995).

So far we have been discussing examples of exclusion but, in the case of the labour market, capability deprivation is caused by unfavourable inclusion rather than exclusion. As Du Toit (2004:994) explains, agriculture in the Western Cape has undergone a loss of permanent employment and an increase in contract labour provided by third parties. For example, 58 per cent of farms surveyed had reduced their permanent workforce, with 47 per cent planning reductions or further reductions (Du Toit 2004:994). Furthermore, much of the contract work is seasonal and wages are low. For example, 16 per cent of households relied on work packing food and vegetables which is only available during the summer (Du Toit 2004:996). Consequently, 'the agricultural labour market is not sufficient to sustain adequate livelihoods...More than four-fifths of respondents...reported household incomes below the poverty line' (Du Toit 2004:996).

While Sen (2000) confined his discussion of constitutive and instrumental relevance to cases of exclusion, there is no reason why the distinction cannot also be made in cases of unfavourable inclusion. Thus, food market poverty, inequality and relational poverty and gender and race related inequalities have constitutive importance because exclusion from the normal life of the community and the inability to feed oneself are deprivations in themselves. Gender and race related inequalities have constitutive importance because the inequalities restrict the capability of women, in particular

African women, to enjoy the kind of life they value. In addition to constitutive importance, food market poverty may also have instrumental importance if inability to purchase food restricts an individual's ability to participate in the normal life of the community, as would be the case if custom required a display of hospitality.

Exclusion from the credit market, from political engagement and unfavourable inclusion in the labour market all have instrumental importance. Exclusion from the credit market restricts an individual's capacity to take advantage of additional income earning opportunities, thereby contributing to food market poverty and making unfavourable inclusion in the labour market more likely, as does exclusion from political engagement. Unfavourable inclusion in the labour market has instrumental importance because it is the primary cause of food market poverty. Thus the chronic poverty experienced by agricultural workers in Ceres can be said to be characterized by a combination of inequality and relational poverty, gender and race related inequality and food market poverty of which the primary cause is unfavourable inclusion (or adverse incorporation, to use Du Toit's term) into the labour market, reinforced by a lack of access to the credit market and exclusion from political engagement.

So far Sen's analytical framework has been sufficient to capture the complexity of the situation facing agricultural workers in Ceres. The focus of the following section is on active and passive forms of exclusion and unfavourable inclusion, an analytical distinction which is important in policy terms and for illuminating the way in which mainstream processes and institutions create or exacerbate capability deprivation.

ACTIVE OR PASSIVE?

As noted previously, agricultural workers in Ceres experience food market poverty, the primary cause of which is unfavourable inclusion into the labour market, reinforced by exclusion from political engagement. This section examines the extent to which these factors are the result of policies or decisions which are intended to produce exclusion or unfavourable inclusion, or are the unintended consequence of other unrelated policy decisions.

Analyzing the situation facing agricultural workers in Ceres using this framework reveals that passive exclusion and unfavourable inclusion occur as a result of national and international policy decisions or trends, whereas at the local level, exclusion and unfavourable inclusion are active. As Du Toit (2004:994) explains, over the last fifteen years agriculture in South Africa has been subject to a number of structural changes, such as the dismantling of the regulatory framework that had previously restricted competition in the sector, a strengthening of social and labour rights and an increase in the power of buyers over other actors in the export agro-commodity sector. As a result of these structural changes, farmers face ‘higher barriers to entry, stiffer competition and greater risk...[as well as] increased direct and indirect costs caused by greater labour and social regulation’ (Du Toit 2004:994). In responding to these pressures many farmers restructured their business, replacing permanent employees with casual and seasonal labour and, at the same time, reducing or abandoning the provision of non-monetary benefits (such as tied housing) previously provided to farm workers (Du Toit 2004:994).

Clearly policy reforms at the national and international level, such as the deregulation of the agriculture sector or international agro-food restructuring were not designed to produce unfavourable inclusion into the labour market. On the other hand, local level responses can be regarded as an active form of unfavourable inclusion. Du Toit (2004:994) notes that ‘fruit and wine farmers, although exposed to increasing pressures, were still largely able to choose how to respond’, and many chose to reduce their own exposure to risk while increasing that of their workers. Similarly, the low wages of agricultural workers were not deliberately designed so that individuals could not afford to buy food, but actions taken at the local level can be seen as active forms of unfavourable inclusion in that workers were not compensated for the removal of benefits such as tied housing by payment of higher wages.

In the past, non-white South Africans were actively excluded from the political process. While the political exclusion currently experienced by agricultural workers in Ceres cannot be divorced from past practice, at the national level, political exclusion can now be characterized as passive rather than active. That is, government policy no longer prevents political participation but current practices do not encourage or facilitate involvement in the political process. Because the national government

has its power base in urban rather than rural areas, it is not sensitive to the concerns of the rural poor, a situation which does not encourage political participation amongst a group of people with no history of political engagement (Du Toit 2004:991&999).

In his analysis of the political marginalization experienced by Scheduled Tribe women in Mysore, India, Vijayalakshmi (2001:20) argued that effective participation in the political process is difficult, if not impossible, while Scheduled Tribe women continue to experience social and economic exclusion. Vijayalakshmi's analysis of the situation facing Scheduled Tribe women also applies to agricultural workers in Ceres. Unfavourably included in economic and social domains, poor agricultural workers are forced to form alliances with powerful patrons in order to survive. These patron-client relationships affect political engagement as they make the poor politically passive and adverse to confrontation (Du Toit 2004:998). Thus, local practices and informal social processes can be seen as an active form of exclusion. For example, Du Toit (2004:998) notes that access to subsidized municipal services is (reportedly) controlled by particular local government officials. Controlling access to government services in this way clearly discourages involvement in local level decision-making because individuals who have very limited resources cannot afford to risk offending one of these "gatekeepers".

One of the criticisms of social exclusion is that it diverts attention away from the way in which mainstream institutions and processes create or exacerbate poverty which in turn affects anti-poverty policies and strategies. That is, poverty is regarded as a problem which can be fixed by integration into the mainstream.

Like social exclusion discourse, policy debates in South Africa are shaped by an uncritical acceptance of the assumption that the solution of problems depends on processes of modernizing reform, job-creation and increased global integration (Du Toit 2004:1006).

Asking the question, is exclusion (or unfavourable inclusion) active or passive, forces the researcher to consider the ways in which policies and practices at the international, national and local level contribute to capability deprivation. As demonstrated in the analysis of the situation facing agricultural workers in Ceres, identifying active and passive forms of exclusion and unfavourable inclusion highlights the fact that chronic poverty is the result of a combination of deliberate choices by specific actors and the unintended consequences of macro-level policy decisions.

CONCLUSION

Social exclusion has been criticized for offering little of substance beyond simplistic distinctions between “insiders” and “outsiders” and, more importantly, for ignoring the ways in which mainstream processes and institutions create or exacerbate poverty and inequality. Any assessment of the usefulness of contested concepts such as social exclusion needs to focus on whether or not the concept assists researchers to tease out the complex, interconnected factors pertinent to particular experiences of chronic poverty. This article argues that Sen’s view of social exclusion offers a number of important analytical distinctions which assist researchers to do just that.

Firstly, Sen takes poverty as the broader concept, with social exclusion only one of a number of reasons why an individual is unable to obtain adequate basic capabilities. Treating social exclusion as a sub-set of poverty means that everything does not have to be explained as some form of exclusion. Being open to the possibility that unfavourable inclusion may be an important causal influence means researchers are less likely to fall into the overly simplistic included/excluded dichotomy rightly criticized by Du Toit (2004).

Secondly, the distinction Sen (2000) draws between forms of exclusion (or unfavourable inclusion) which are in themselves a deprivation and those which are not necessarily negative but which can lead to deprivation, allows the researcher to elaborate the causal chain, an important ability when analyzing situations characterized by complex causal factors.

The third analytical distinction identified by Sen (2000) is that of active and passive forms of exclusion (and unfavourable inclusion). As with the previous distinction between constitutive and instrumental relevance, knowing whether the causal influence is the result of a deliberate policy decision or the unintended consequence of other policy decisions is useful in determining an appropriate policy response. Identifying causal factors as active forms of exclusion (or unfavourable inclusion) focuses attention on the reasons behind the deliberate decision to exclude, allowing debate on whether the reasons for the exclusion are justified. Identifying causal factors as passive forms of exclusion focuses attention on the ways in which the unintended consequences can be ameliorated. Finally, and perhaps most importantly,

distinguishing between active and passive forms of exclusion forces the researcher to consider the ways in which policies and practices at the international, national and local level contribute to capability deprivation. In other words, it forces the researcher to consider the ways in which mainstream processes and institutions create or exacerbate capability deprivation.

Effective policy responses depend on a deep understanding of the complex set of causal influences at work in any particular situation. Sen's analytical framework is not the only set of conceptual tools available to researchers, but it is one which, to date, has not been widely used. The analysis of the situation facing agricultural workers in Ceres presented in this article suggests that the concept of social exclusion does have something to offer those interested in the analysis of chronic poverty in developing societies if a more sophisticated use is made of existing analytical resources.

Notes

1. For Sen (2000:43) food market poverty occurs when there is no shortage of food available through the market, but certain groups in society experience hunger because they are unable to purchase sufficient food for themselves or their families.

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